Rent is Theft

David Rovics

2026

a review of

Squat the City! How to Use the Arts for Housing Justice by Norman Nawrocki. Kerspledebeb Publishing, 2025

"Property is theft."

—Pierre-Joseph Proudhon

As the cost of housing continues to skyrocket throughout North America and so many other parts of the world, as massive corporations like Blackrock buy up and monopolize housing and rental markets, causing prices to skyrocket even faster, the ranks of those disaffected with the workings of the capitalist system are growing.

Squat the City! presents us with a slew of ideas and examples that those involved with any social movement should find useful.

Norman Nawrocki, a Montreal activist, cabaret artist, violinist, actor and educator, begins with messages targeted at two groups—artists and organizers—that often seem to be so disconnected from each other now, but which historically have collaborated to generate, educate, and sustain innumerable social movements world-wide. He provides us with many excellent examples of campaigns he has been involved with in Canada that relied heavily on the arts for popular education, as a powerful tool for publicity, and as a source of great inspiration to attract people and emotionally sustain participants.

The good timing and inherent value of this book is hard to overstate. Having a place to live in Canada, the US, and other countries that suffer from woefully inadequate regulation of the housing market means coming face to face with the feudal nature of modern capitalism.

Rather than fantasies of competition among companies seeking to win a share of the market by providing a superior good or service, the housing market is monopolized by gargantuan corporations that set increasingly unrealistic rental prices knowing people need to be housed and are forced to acquiesce to their demands.

The need and the desire to challenge this feudal reality is deep, and *Squat the City!* is full of good ideas for how to go about building the kind of movement required to do so. As Nawrocki illustrates, the kind of movement that brings people together most effectively, that communicates best to the broadest numbers of people, that fosters the kind of sense of community that any movement needs in order to grow or even just not shrink and disappear, is a profoundly artistic movement.

The power of singing together, of community theater, of writing a play and performing it together, the possibilities for creating memes and spreading ideas and inspiring communities through music, theater, poetry, puppets, murals, and so many other forms of public art is not only described in the pages of this book, but in the history of most every successful social movement.

Most recently, Singing Resistance, a grassroots movement that began in Minneapolis following the ICE murders of Renee Good and Alex Pretti, uses communal singing in the streets to resist ICE. It has spread

to Detroit, Seattle and other cities, inspired by Optor, a Serbian civil resistance movement. Mainstream popular culture artists have added their voices to the opposition that is popping up everywhere. Bruce Springsteen's song, "Streets of Minneapolis," U2's "American Obituary" and many others demonstrate the power of this medium of communication in the conversation in the ongoing struggle against the violence of ICE and the U.S. Border Patrol.

The blending of the arts and activism that Nawrocki writes about will be familiar to those acquainted with the methods employed by groups like the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) in the early 20th century, the Depression-era labor movement of the 1930s, the Civil Rights and antiwar movements of the 1960s, or the environmental and global justice campaigns of the 1990s and early 2000s.

All of these upsurges demanding social justice were engaged in the same creative efforts documented by Nawrocki. Organizing efforts that relied tremendously on using music, theater, illustrations and other forms of artistic expression to do their best work at popular education, recruitment, and retention of campaign participants.

The Housing Rights Cabaret show, the Political Art Festival, the Creative Resistance project, and everything else Nawrocki explores in the book are all great examples of the ways people can use art, music, and theater as tools for community organizing—from the writing of a play or a song or a poem as a group effort to the staging of a performance to the organization of a road show to bring the performance to other communities, Nawrocki illustrates how the arts can play a pivotal role in the whole process of organizing a campaign or a movement, every step of the way.

Looking at history, it seems abundantly clear that we ignore the lessons in this book at our collective peril. The de-coupling of the arts and activism that has taken place in recent decades seems obviously very damaging.

Go to a rally about most anything in recent years and even decades in the US and you will find very little if any live music, and very few if anyone communicating through means such as giant puppets or other forms of artistic expression. These kinds of rallies minus the creative arts are alienating, usually grim and fail to attract passersby.

Completely different are the sorts of events Nawrocki describes. This kind of organizing attracts people, makes people want to see what's going on, brings people together, and can even cause opponents to rethink their perspective. It's the type of activity that can win hearts and minds, which is the kind of organizing a movement requires if it is to be anything more than a flash in the pan of history.

David Rovics is a musician, writer, and anarchist based in Portland, Oregon. His latest album, *Insurrection Act*, is up on all the music streaming platforms except for YouTube Music, where all of his albums were deleted last November. His YouTube channel was deleted in January, and then restored due to popular demand, for the moment. **davidrovics.com**

fifth estate

David Rovics
Rent is Theft
2026

https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/418-summer-2026/rent-is-theft
Fifth Estate #418, Summer 2026

fifthestate.anarchistlibraries.net